



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

“On what terms can we speak?” Refusal, resurgence and climate justice

This is the Published version of the following publication

Birch, Anthony (2018) “On what terms can we speak?” Refusal, resurgence and climate justice. *Coolabah* (24&25). pp. 2-16. ISSN 1988-5946

The publisher’s official version can be found at
<http://revistes.ub.edu/index.php/coolabah/article/view/22069>
Note that access to this version may require subscription.

Downloaded from VU Research Repository <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/39207/>

*“On what terms can we speak?”
Refusal, resurgence and climate justice*

Tony Birch
Victoria University
Anthony.Birch@vu.edu.au

Copyright©2018 Tony Birch. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged, in accordance with our Creative Commons Licence.

Abstract: Australia, along with nations and communities across the globe, faces the difficult task of formulating genuine responses to climate change. Indigenous people in Australia are at the forefront of the issue, both as communities majorly impacted on by climate change, and the custodians of knowledge, scientific and philosophical, able to assist other communities in working towards the health and protection of country. Indigenous communities also have historical relationships with mining companies responsible for the mining of fossil fuels, and face a decision of allowing or refusing mining on traditional land, which may result in a material loss for these communities, while producing a long-term benefit on behalf of the planet. Future relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia will determine the success of initiatives in combating climate change. For this to occur, productive and equitable relationships will need to move beyond the symbolic gesture, beyond a form of *recognition* that does little more than maintain existing colonial relationships. In recent years, Indigenous scholars, particularly from North America, have articulated ‘the politics of refusal’ as a strategy of empowering Indigenous people and protecting country. In doing so, important questions arise: Can we afford to *refuse* acts of engagement with ‘outsiders’ that may benefit country? Or is the act of *refusal* a necessary step that may confront colonial society with the reality that it is colonialism itself that refuses change?

Keywords: recognition; refusal, protection of country

Introduction: “Unite with us to fight this fight”

In June 2017, the prominent Indigenous intellectual and academic, Professor Marcia Langton, delivered a keynote address to Australian mining industry leaders. During her speech, Langton was critical of those she described as “cashed-up green groups” and their

supporters who oppose the proposed Adani coal mine planned for central Queensland. (For a detailed summary of the size and scope of the proposed mine and its potential impact on Indigenous land owners, the Wangan and Jagalingou Group, see Lyons, Brigg and Quiggin, 2017.) According to Langton, opposition to what would be one of the world's largest fossil fuel mines, one that would have a dramatic impact on carbon levels released into the atmosphere, was a clear example of the "environmental industry hijacking our [Indigenous peoples] most serious concerns, and in their own way trying to return us to the pre-1992 era of terra nullius" (Langton, quoted in Murphy, 2017). Several weeks earlier, Warren Mundine, a former representative on the Commonwealth's Indigenous reference group, also criticised unnamed environmental activists who he claimed had repeatedly "attacked mining and infrastructure projects" to the disadvantage of Indigenous people (Mundine, 2017).

Neither Langton's or Mundine's criticisms would have surprised anyone with a passing interest in the interactions between Indigenous communities, mining companies and environmental groups. The historic relationship has sometimes been a tense one, with conflict and division well documented. In a recent collection of essays discussing this history, key researchers in the area, Eve Vincent and Timothy Neale, while recognising such tensions, astutely examine the complexity of 'Green/Black' relationships in a thoughtful and informed manner, moving beyond a discussion of environmentalists being "crudely characterised" and "lampooned" by opponents, as Langton and Mundine had done (Vincent and Neale, 2016, p. 3).

During Langton's lecture, she referred to Indigenous communities in Australia as the "collateral damage" of environmental activism, with opposition to the proposed Adani mine her focus. Her provocative stance was immediately countered by Tony McAvoy SC, a legal representative the Wangan and Jagalingou people. (McAvoy is himself a member of the Wangan and Jagalingou community.) In a retort to Langton's remarks, he commented that "to suggest that the Greens are puppet masters pulling the strings and we're somehow puppets was wildly off the mark and disrespectful to the many families opposing the mine" (McAvoy, quoted in Robertson, 2017). He concluded that Langton was "very poorly informed" about the Adani mine dispute, and supported the formal position of the Wangan and Jagalingou, who have repeatedly stated, in opposition to the mine, that they "have never consented to Adani's mine being constructed on our land" (Wangan and Jagalingou Family Council, 2017).

The Wangan and Jagalingou have also refused to sign an Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) with the Queensland government and the Adani corporation. Without their written consent the mine cannot proceed, unless the Queensland government is willing to suspend the Native Title Act, which for some within the state Labor Party creates a political, if not an ethical dilemma. The traditional owners, who do not regard themselves as the "puppets" of any outside group, green or otherwise, have actively sought the support of environmental groups, in addition to calling for the assistance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across Australia willing to commit themselves to protect the health of both country and the planet. Adrian Burragubba, a senior Wangan and Jagalingou man, has led the call for collective action:

I'm going to convince all of our people to stand together as one people, one voice. And then we're going to ask all Australian people and people from all

over the world to stand with us, unite with us to fight this fight. (Burrage, 2015)

Just a voice

Invitations by Indigenous land owners to support the protection of country is occurring during a political and social climate that will determine future relationships with country and each other. This is a major issue, not only for Australia, but with consideration of the extent of the climate change challenges we face, the manner in which we engage with species, both human and non-human on a global scale. Within Australia, environmental challenges coincide with a shift in political, legal and social relationships between Indigenous people and the Australian nation. Over recent years the Commonwealth government, with the general bi-partisan support of the Labor Opposition, the Greens party and Independents within the parliament (with a few notable exceptions, including Pauline Hanson's One Nation party), has led an initiative directed towards holding a future referendum that may deliver formal recognition of Indigenous people within the Commonwealth constitution (for details, see <http://www.recognise.org.au/about>).

While the formal wording of any proposed statement within the constitution, and any subsequent legal implications, remain to be determined, in 2015 the Commonwealth embarked on an expensive branding and education program in an effort to facilitate the success of a future "Yes" vote amongst the wider population, in addition to attempting to gather support within Indigenous communities. The second task remained a difficult one throughout the campaign, with many people within Indigenous communities sceptical of the proposal due to its limited symbolic value. The view of many was summarised by the artist and theatre director Rachel Maza:

I liken the Recognise campaign and the push to make mention of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people in the constitution to the scenario of someone moving into your house, taking over, and kicking you out into the yard in the shed. After many years, maybe even several generations, they come out to the yard holding the contract that states their rights to the house that was once yours, and suggest that it's only fair to include a sentence that says: 'We acknowledge that you once lived there. There you go! Now you're recognised,' they say, and they go back into your house and you go back to the shed (Maza, quoted in Kelly, 2017).

The Referendum Council, established by the Commonwealth, comprising both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members, travelled the country, meeting with communities and holding information forums to promote the initiative; a program since regarded as flawed from the outset:

Few bothered to ask why Indigenous people would want symbolic recognition in what many regard as the founding document of the settler state—as opposed to the many practical measures, sadly lacking, that might actually improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human outcomes. If such a document was to acknowledge Indigenous people, they were saying, it would

have to do so in a way that would amplify—rather than merely note—the black voice. (Daley, 2017)

The Recognise campaign culminated in a gathering of Indigenous representatives from across Australia at Uluru in May 2017 (Walkquist, 2017). The meeting produced the statement “From The Heart” addressing the possible wording of constitutional recognition, limited Indigenous parliamentary representation and the concept of a treaty, discussed at a broad level (see Kelly, 2017, for a summary). Several delegates at the gathering were critical of the final wording of what also became known as “The Uluru Statement” as they believed it did not provide a legitimate and authoritative role for Indigenous people in parliament, nor address the demands for a treaty in a concrete and specific manner. Nevertheless, the request for the establishment of a representative Indigenous advisory group to the parliament and the noting of future discussions of a treaty, were enough to unsettle a government suddenly blindsided, having not foreseen or welcomed a conversation either about a treaty or limited parliamentary representation. (Although a prominent member of the Referendum Council Noel Pearson has subsequently stated that he had discussed the prospect of parliamentary representation on several occasions with members of the government, including the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. For details, see Pearson, 2017.)

Soon after the Uluru meeting, the formal recognition campaign came to a quiet and unheralded end in August 2017, absent of the fanfare accompanying its launch. The Commonwealth subsequently rejected the advice provided to it by the very group it had established (the Referendum Council) to engage in a dialogue with Indigenous communities to gauge how to best *grant* recognition. Senior ministers within the government quickly dismissed the idea of limited representation *to* the parliament (rather than *in* it) as a “radical proposal” that the Commonwealth could not support (Viellaris, 2017). And while the government decision was received with apparent ‘shock’ by members of the Referendum Council, it did not surprise others versed in the limitations of what amounted to yet another symbolic colonial gesture:

I’ve written previously about how ‘Recognise’—for all the tens of millions of dollars spent on it by successive governments—was a white political construct, dreamed up by John Howard (never a friend of Indigenous Australia) in an attempt to slither out of a political jam, that attached itself to successive governments. (Daley, 2017)

While ‘giving voice’ to Indigenous people in the parliament might not seem such a radical proposal to some, opposition to idea by the Commonwealth highlights an enduring inability of Australian governments to engage with Indigenous people beyond the symbolic, with governments preferring to maintain relationships limiting the rights and autonomy of Indigenous people. Noel Pearson was a key member of the Referendum Council. In a recent essay, both a highly charged critique of the failed journey of the Recognise campaign and an appraised self-reflection, Pearson states that he is “astounded at the pragmatism and discipline I mustered in giving voice and life” to what he has repeatedly referred to as “the radical centre” (Pearson, 2017a, p. 28). According to Pearson’s own analysis, it was a strategy of failure: “reaching out to the political leadership of the right availed us nothing in the end. This is the bitter truth I learned in the past 17 years” (Pearson, 2017a, p. 34). The flaws in Pearson’s strategy and

conclusions are numerous, chiefly the belief and rhetoric that the political centre is radical. Within Australian political culture, such a strategy relies on a *benign* centre, with both the parliament and the political constituency across the country. It is where symbolism flourishes, where genuine challenges to the political and cultural status quo are not welcome.

Following the Commonwealth's decision to reject the Council's key recommendation, he (along with others) repeated the statement of the Indigenous "elder statesman," Patrick Dodson, that the government's decision was a "kick in the guts for Aboriginal Australians" (Pearson, 2017b). While he claimed the Uluru statement rejected "mere symbolism," Pearson's own analysis of the structure of an "Indigenous voice to the parliament" appears to be, if not symbolic, severely limited in what it could achieve. The Referendum Council, having adopted a strategic approach of *soft* recognition were subsequently outmanoeuvred by more conservative forces in government, regardless of Referendum Council members, including Pearson himself, attempting to highlight the *limitations* of their own definition of recognition:

The proposal is for an Indigenous advisory body, constitutionally mandated but legislatively implemented, to give Indigenous people a non-binding say in our affairs. Not a veto. Just a voice ... it would empower parliament to define the body, fully respecting parliamentary *supremacy* (Pearson, 2017b, my italics).

Following the collapse of the Recognise campaign and the body charged with delivering constitutional reform, the Commonwealth, state and territory governments must now contend with more overtly self-determining strategies being adopted by Indigenous groups, most particularly a proactive treaty campaign framed and led by Victorian Indigenous communities, initiated in 2016, running a counter political and legal narrative to the Recognise discourse (see Victorian Traditional Owner Land Justice Group, 2016, for a detailed summary of the planned Treaty process). It was an outcome of the success of the Victorian grassroots campaign and a willingness of the Victorian state government to begin negotiations on the form of treaty (for details, see Victorian State Government, 2017) that shifted the focus of national Indigenous responses to the Recognise campaign, to the surprise and disappointment of both the Commonwealth government and the Referendum Council.

During the formal life of recognition, direct activist campaigns were also being organised within Indigenous communities, gathering widespread support, particularly amongst younger people. Bypassing symbolic gestures, younger Indigenous people were voicing their concerns about issues such as climate justice, the impact of climate change on the ability to protection of country, and the struggle for a genuine *recognition* of Indigenous sovereignty in the form of Land Rights. The Climate Justice campaign was led by the climate justice group, SEED Indigenous Youth Climate Network (see <http://www.seedmob.org.au/> for details of the organisation and its programs). Warriors of Aboriginal Resistance (WAR), inspired by the history of direct activism employed by Indigenous groups in Australia, and the more recent Occupy and Idle No More campaigns of North America (see <https://www.facebook.com/WARcollective/>) reject the concept of recognition, with their activities contingent on the politically guiding statement, "sovereignty has never been ceded." Not surprisingly, one of WAR's strategies, the

temporary shutting down of whole streets and blocks within major Australian cities, has limited appeal for those in the wider non-Indigenous community unable to countenance the true principle of self-determination. WAR's direct-action strategy is a challenge to those within Australian society more concerned with image than substance. WAR also challenged the central tenet of the recognition campaign. It not only opposed the Recognise charter. WAR also *refused* to be recognised.

Refusal and reciprocity

The language of recognition within Australia has coincided with a global critique of the colonial baggage and psyche framing both the term and its supporting narrative. In a recent special issue of the academic journal *Postcolonial Studies*, the editors introduced the collection of essays with the statement that "Recognition has emerged in recent decades as an almost universally valued moral and political horizon in intercultural contexts" (Balaton-Chrimes and Stead, 2017, p. 1). While the genesis of the language and critique of recognition can be traced to the work such scholars as Charles Taylor in the 1990s, via Franz Fanon's seminal *Black Skin, White Mask*, published in 1967, contemporary critiques have been led by Indigenous scholars from North America, such as Audra Simpson (her work appears in the same *Postcolonial Studies* issue) and Glen Sean Coulthard, whose book *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* appears to be compulsory reading on the subject (Coulthard, 2014).

In a provocative analysis of the politics of recognition recognisable to Indigenous people in Australia, Audra Simpson positions contemporary notions of recognition offered by settler-colonial governments as integrally linked to past "colonial contexts [that] enforced Indigenous dispossession and then, granted freedom through the legal tricks of consent and citizenship" (Simpson, 2017, p. 20). Equally familiar to Indigenous people in Australia is the analysis provided by Lara Fullenwieder (in the same edition of the journal), commenting on a comparable situation in Canada. Fullenwieder argues that having positioned "recognition as a policy strategy for governing settler/Indigenous relations," the Canadian national government, led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, is attempting to "evade central contestations regarding land, autonomy, and Indigenous sovereignty," preferring an orchestrated and benign shift "beyond the violence of the frontier" (Fullenwieder, 2017, p. 37), absent of the need for responsibility for ongoing impacts of colonisation on First Nations people.

Glen Coulthard's demand for a concerted refusal of colonial/governmental recognition is not simply a negative or static example of the act of *refusing*. He is concerned with the potential and political revitalisation contained within what he defines as First Nations "resurgence," being the outcome of what he refers to as "the politics of the act [of refusal]"; an act of necessity in order to restore knowledge eroded through the ongoing settler-colonial project of "undermining Indigenous intellectual development through cultural assimilation and the violent separation of Indigenous peoples from our sources of knowledge and strength—the land" (Wildcat, McDonald, Irlbacher-Fox and Coulthard, 2014, p. i).

In an interview following the publication of *Red Skin, White Masks*, Coulthard explained the politics of refusal as “enacting Indigenous alternatives [that] on the ground will bring us into *productive* confrontation with the colonial structures of exploitation and domination” (Coulthard, quoted in interview with Gardner and Clancy, 2017, my italics). For Coulthard, and for many Indigenous people globally, this productive confrontation is necessary if we are to overcome the stubborn adherence to a continuation of colonial domination, embedded in the ideology of recognition itself:

Instead of ushering in an era of peaceful coexistence grounded on the ideal of *reciprocity* or *mutual* recognition, the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend. (Coulthard, 2014, p. 3, original italics)

Land as pedagogy

We know that climate change poses a grave threat to the livelihood and health of country. It is a crisis impacting severely on global Indigenous nations and poorer communities more generally. To face the global crisis of climate change we require collective, collaborative, and equitable strategies of achievement. We desperately need people to work productively together. Therefore, is the politics of refusal a strategy we can afford? Sarah Hunt, discussing the act of Indigenous refusal in relation to both the value of knowledge exchange and the pragmatism that may be required by Indigenous communities and individuals negotiating change with colonial power, addresses the pragmatism of refusal:

It does not seem that outright rejection of all forms of recognition are politically viable ... if Indigenous sovereignty can only be attained through self-affirmation, how do we reconcile the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, and ourselves as Indigenous people, in these dominant institutions? (Hunt, 2014, p. 29)

While Hunt’s point is vital in considerations of contemporary and future relations with the colonial state, Coulthard’s analysis of the potential of Indigenous resurgence as an outcome of the act of refusal does not begin and end with self-affirmation. In relation to climate change and the collective challenges we face, Coulthard’s view is key to the mature and ethical and shift required to both *recognise* the role exercised by colonialism in the destruction of people and country historically, and a need to begin the restorative processes required to protect country and facilitate climate justice. He articulates the persuasive argument that through the refusal of the offer of repeated gestures of symbolism, absent of a genuine tangible change in Indigenous/settler-colonial relationships, an opportunity arises, focusing our attention where it is most needed:

The theory and practice of anticolonialism ... is best understood as a struggle primarily inspired by and oriented around *the question of land*—a struggle not only *for* land in a material sense, but also deeply *informed* by

land as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations. (Coulthard, 2014,
p. 13, original italics)

Absent of this focus, as far as Coulthard is concerned, the hollow colonial gesture will continue to prevail. With the climate crisis in mind, it is a gesture we can no longer afford. Jason W. Moore offers a model of ethical engagement similar to that presented by Coulthard. Moore, responsible for the term “Capitalocene” as a means of countering the dominant Anthropocene thesis, regards capitalism, and its rise from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (see Malm, 2016, for a discussion of this history) as a major contributor to the current climate change crisis. As a direct result of climate injustices, he has argued for a fundamental shift in relations between Indigenous nations, the colonial state and global corporations based on a concept of “reparations ecology,” which Moore regards as “fundamental to remembering the violence and inequality of modernity ... the question of justice and sustainability are deeper than interlinked, they are intimate” (Moore, interview with Velednitsky, 2017).

With Moore’s and Coulthard’s provocations in mind, we need to address the concept of justice and reparations within Australia, commencing with developing equitable and respectful relationships between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous Australia. The protection of country will become a precarious venture if we do not do this. While researchers and policy makers agree that Indigenous communities will be severely impacted upon by climate change, until recently Indigenous people have not been duly considered, either as the victims of climatic disasters, such as extreme and unpredictable weather events, or, based on traditional knowledge and experience, the providers of insights in how the challenges of climate change may be met (see Birch, 2016, for details). For the exchange of knowledge around ecological maintenance to be rendered equitable, dialogues and *communities* of trust must be developed. We require fresh and meaningful approaches to Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships that bypass the symbolic gesture in favour of the tangible and grounded, embedded in country, articulated no more pointedly than in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s comment “the land must again *become* the pedagogy” (Simpson, 2014, p. 14, original italics). For Simpson, as with Coulthard, the recognition of land itself as our teacher is a key stepping-stone towards Indigenous resurgence:

A resurgence of Indigenous political cultures, governances and nation-building requires generations of Indigenous peoples to grow up intimately and strongly connected to our homelands, immersed in our languages and spiritualities. (Simpson, 2014, p. 1)

Whose bones do we walk on?

The potential for enriched connections, producing outcomes of common good—being the protection of country—remain hamstrung by both our colonial past and the contemporary failure to attend to the potential of *equitable* recognition. We may rightly question whether it is possible for a colonial society such as Australia, one that applies symbolic gestures as a masking agent, to engage with Indigenous people and country in a substantive way. Zoe Todd, an Indigenous scholar from Canada, believes that in order to

address the global environmental situation we face, whether it be a world increasingly impacted on by chaotic weather events, or a realisation that we are witnessing the birth of a “new epoch,” the Anthropocene (contested or not), “there are other stories that could be told” beyond those of the dominant culture (Todd, 2015, p. 244). And yet Todd remains cautious about the sharing of Indigenous knowledge, through narrative, with a society yet to fully comprehend storytelling as a form of sovereign knowledge; a society yet to address the fundamental question, “whose bones are ground into the earth we walk on” (Cree legal scholar, Tracey Lindberg, quoted in Todd, 2017).

Many Indigenous thinkers and protectors of country, while valuing the strength of stories that sustain our engagement with country, remain equally concerned about the issue of sharing knowledge and its abuse. Alexis Wright, the Indigenous intellectual and writer, discussing both the misappropriation of Indigenous stories by the colonial nation and the production of fictitious counter narratives constructed to damage Indigenous people and country both, has recently asked, “what happens when you tell someone else’s story” and what happens when you are silenced by a society that both covets your own story and invents others to advance its own power?

We do not get much of a chance to say what is right or wrong about the stories told on our behalf—which stories are told or how they are told. It just happens, and we try to deal with the fallout (Wright, 2016).

The potential for what Deborah Bird Rose discusses as an equitable relationship or “dialogue” (as opposed to integration) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Rose, 2015) is repeatedly hampered by the realities of the unfinished business of colonial history and its contemporary manifestations. And yet, if there is cause for optimism, it may be located in the spirit of generosity offered by Indigenous people inviting others to join with them in valuing and caring for country through cultural practice and exchange. In accordance with the strategy adopted by the Wangan and Jagalingou efforts to halt the proposed Adani mine, other Indigenous communities and individuals across Australia actively seek a more productive relationship with ‘outsiders’ with regard to both the protection of land and knowledge of country more generally.

Teila Watson, a Birra Gubba and Kungalu woman, writes that for country to be adequately cared for and protected, “White Australia” must invest in a “black future” that formally recognises Indigenous culture and law (Watson, 2017). In parts of Australia, innovative relationships are being forged along such lines; connections that move beyond the short-term and strategic to the more sustained, long-term and philosophical. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, a traditional woman living outside of Alice Springs, regularly invites non-Indigenous Australians to begin an engagement of country invested in patience, meditation and what she refers to as “deep listening” to the land, or “Dadirri,” an “Indigenous practice her people use to find out who they really are, their purpose and where they are going” (Kohn, 2016. n.pag.).

The concept of Dadirri requires a ‘deeper’ understanding of country by non-Indigenous people. The generosity of Ungunmerr-Baumann’s offer to participate in learning from country cannot be underestimated. Hers is a bold gesture within a socio/political climate of friction, suspicion and occasionally, open hostility. Similarly, Darren Perry, the chair of the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations, working alongside Indigenous

and non-Indigenous groups in an effort to protect the health of waterways of country across regional New South Wales, seeks wide-ranging partnerships with people willing to recognise the knowledge of country and deep history held within the forty-six Indigenous groups his organisation represents:

We're sovereign first nations and we've been managers of water resources within our traditional country for many thousands of generations, so it goes without saying we should be partners not stakeholders in water management in this country. (Darren Perry, quoted in Winter, 2015)

The invitations offered by Indigenous people to participate in the protection of country could not be happening at a more vital time. Country is suffering on a global scale as a result of past colonial land management practices and a contemporary reliance on those practices within both mining and agricultural industries. And while climate change itself might not be best described as a colonial event, it is clearly a phenomenon created to some extent by the combined forces of colonial expansion, the Industrial Revolution and an increased reliance on the burning of fossil fuels (Malm, 2016). Zoe Todd recently commented that in her "short lifetime" she has seen "the waterways of my home province deteriorate as intense oil and gas activity, urban development, agricultural demands, and climate change tighten" (Todd, 2017). She concludes that new and innovative formations between people and communities are necessary, not only due to the catastrophic environmental changes she has witnessed, but with the knowledge that the manner in which we now proceed as a global community will be judged by those who have gone *before* us.

Todd's telling statement, that "the ancestors [will] bear witness to our deliberations," provides us with both a warning and an opportunity to rectify our relationship to country and each other (Todd, 2017). The balance we require when confronting the environmental challenges of our times must combine aspects of the spiritual and intellectual practices of Indigenous thinkers and land protectors such as Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, alongside a transformative self-critique of colonial institutions and practices at odds with our duty to revive the health of the planet:

Using, respecting, and making space for Indigenous Knowledge constitutes a fundamental challenge to power relations in whatever context it operates. Indigenous Knowledge has transformative potential with respect to confronting settler colonial norms within institutions in which it is used. (Irlbacher-Fox, 2014, p. 148)

A great deal is at stake for Indigenous peoples considering entering into new relationships with colonial society. Our collective first steps are generally understandably tentative but potentially invaluable. Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox makes an instructive point that strategic and mutually beneficial relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people—in the opposition of a fossil fuel mine, for instance—need not be overburdened with the objective of establishing "permanence" or the immediate "decolonizing of the [colonial] self." She reminds us that "often alliances are transitory, cemented by mutual self-interest" (Irlbacher-Fox, 2014, p. 151). She argues that any new relationship can work more productively with the realisation of its limitations in mind. Relationships initially structured to be temporal and strategic in nature do offer the potential of evolution, a more

binding relationship that may occur at an unspecified future date. Simone Bignall raises this idea in a discussion on activism and political collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Hers is a deliberately fluid and speculative notion, but one that nonetheless presents us with an opportunity for a valued and sustained shift:

I introduce the term 'excolonial' ('exit-from-colonialism') to designate an ideally decolonised form of future community that is (perpetually) 'yet to come' ... I would use 'ex' to describe a former relationship, which remains indelible and shaping part of my history but with which I am no longer entangled in a defining manner. (Bignall, 2014, p. 241)

Conclusion: The Ecological Imagination

So, how might we "exit" from colonialism and refuse the limitations of recognition while not turning away from each other at a time in our history when we can least afford to do so? Dwayne Donald, an Indigenous scholar from Canada has been dealing with this question for some years. With regard to the potential for conversations and connections that might lead to productive change, he believes that "we're frequently missing each other," making fruitful dialogue hardly possible. The cause of what he refers to as "disconnection" is clear: "I see colonialism as an extended process of denying relationships" (Donald, 2011). Interestingly, for Donald, a politics of refusal is embedded within the history of colonialism itself. His challenge to us is that we refuse colonialism's stubborn and arrogant act of *refusing* its own dismantlement, and rather, begin the important archaeological work of "excavating the colonial terrain:"

Decolonisation can only occur when we face each other across these historic divides ... when we deconstruct the past we share, and begin to imagine a different relationship, ethical and respectful. (Donald, 2011)

The "different relationship" that might be achieved, for Donald, may be located in modes of thought and action that he refers to as "ethical relationality," addressing the reflection "who you are, where you come from," and secondly, engaging in the "enactment of ecological imagination" that helps determine and answer the "who" and "where:"

Paying attention to the webs and relationships that you're enmeshed in—depending on where you live ... all those things that give us life, all the things that we depend on, as well as the entities that we relate to ... we depend on those relationships for survival. (Donald, 2011)

Zoe Todd calls for a relationship to country similar to Donald's (as many Indigenous intellectuals do). She asks that we "speak about Indigenous people's relationships to land, water, law, language, history, and futures" (Todd, 2017). Our relationships, therefore, to non-human species, including plants, raises ethical questions for all involved in issues of Indigenous rights, climate justice and environmental protection. For instance, who speaks *for* and *on behalf of* non-human species? Or rather, how do we speak *with* the non-human? Does the act of refusal of the colonial gesture by humans, impact negatively on non-human species? Or does refusal, enacted with the level of cultural and political

sophistication with which Glen Coulthard articulates it, hold the potential for deeper, more permanent and equitable relationships for *all*, forged of action rather than symbolism? The question cannot be answered here. And perhaps it is not a question to be answered at all, but rather serve as a reminder of the challenging work to be done that will both protect country and dismantle the framework of global colonisation.

It is worth closing with a story of North America's Pawnee nation, retold by the First Nations scholar and activist, Winona LaDuke. The Pawnee had been driven from sections of their own land, which had been incorporated into the state of Nebraska. The Pawnee were forced to move to Oklahoma. They took many of their sacred vegetables seeds with them. The seeds failed to adapt to the soils in Oklahoma, on what was for the Pawnee and the seeds both, foreign land. Their precious seed bank dwindled. Many years later, settler-colonial communities back in Nebraska heard about what happened to the seeds. Contact was made and the Pawnee were asked if they wanted to return some seeds to *home* soil for planting. After some discussion, and seemingly some anguish (according to LaDuke), the seeds were sent home, where they flourished. Vegetables grew and the seed bank itself was replenished.

LaDuke's own response to the Pawnee story is both provocative, in a generous manner, and instructive. It is also helpful when considering the type of relationships that will help us move forward and protect country. She concludes that the exchange of the seeds and the valuable outcome resulted from the exchange was an act of both "apology and redemption" on the part of the settler community, based on their *actions* above and beyond symbolism. It is only through such actions that forgiveness, subsequently offered by the Pawnee, was possible. LaDuke concludes the story with a remarkable comment, which is as challenging as it is exhilarating. Her reasoning for the healthy outcome of the planting of seeds is that "the seeds remembered the land they came from ... corn is more than a food. It is a history" (LaDuke, 2011).

Corn does not carry a history. *It is a history*. LaDuke also believes that "corn in itself, needs relationships to humans" in order to survive. To become truly invested in the protection of country, therefore, we must become responsible for the health and survival of the non-human. While we could sensibly argue that our own survival ultimately depends on accepting this view, as both Indigenous knowledge and the science of ecology realise, we should think beyond or rather *before* survival as a primary motivation for acceptance of this realisation. We must also understand the act of reciprocity as not one that exists only between human societies. Reciprocity, in its fullest sense entails "systems of creating and maintaining useful knowledge of how humans can be good stewards of the earth" (Chief, Daigle, Lynn and Whyte, 2014, p. 163). Therefore, what we choose to truly recognise or refuse is a difficult, necessary and powerful choice.

References

- Balaton-Chrimes, S., and Stead, V. (Eds.). (2017). *Postcolonial Studies, Special Issue: Beyond Recognition*, vol. 20, (1).
- Birch, T. (2016). "Climate Change, Mining and Traditional Indigenous Knowledge in

- Australia." *Social Inclusion*, vol. 4, (1), n.pag. Doi: 10.17645/si.v4i1.
- Bignall, S. (2014). "The Collaborative Struggle for Excolonialism". *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 4, (4), pp. 340-354. Doi: 10.1080/2201473X.2014.911651.
- Burragubba, A. (2015). "Stop Adani Destroying Our Land And Culture." Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZB2JC6yKy_E.
- Chief, K., Daigle, J.J., Lynn, K., and Whyte, K.P. (2014). "Indigenous Experiences in the U.S. with Climate Change and Environmental Stewardship in the Anthropocene." In: Sample, V.A., and Bixler, R.P. (Eds.). *Forest Conservation and Management in the Anthropocene: Conference proceedings*. Proceedings. RMRS-P-71. Fort Collins, CO: US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, pp. 161-176.
- Coulthard, G.S. (2014). *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Daley, P. (2017). "The Whole Recognise Process has Deep Colonial Resonance." *The Guardian*, 27 October.
- Donald, D. (2011). "On What Terms Can We Speak." University of Lethbridge, Canada. <https://vimeo.com/15264558>.
- Fullenwieder, L. (2017). "Framing Indigenous Self-Recognition: The Visual and Cultural Work of the Politics of Recognition." Balaton-Chrimes, S., and Stead, V. (Eds.). *Postcolonial Studies, Special Issue: Beyond Recognition*, vol. 20, (1), pp. 34-50. Doi: 10.1080/13688790.2017.1357219.
- Gardner, K., and Clancy, D. (2017). "From Recognition to Decolonization: An Interview with Glen Coulthard." *Upping The Anti*, no. 19, September 2017, retrieved from <http://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/19-from-recognition-to-decolonization/>, n.pag.
- Hunt, S. (2014). "Ontologies of Indigeneity: The Politics of Embodying a Concept." *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 21, (1), pp. 27-32. Doi: 10.1177/1474474013500226.
- Irlbacher-Fox, S. (2014). "Traditional Knowledge, Co-Existence and Co-Resistance." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 3, (3), pp. 145-158.
- Kelly, S. (2017). "The Uluru Statement from the Heart: In the Words of Indigenous Australians." *The Monthly*, 29 May. Retrieved from <https://www.themonthly.com.au/today/sean-kelly/2017/29/2017/1496039300/uluru-statement-heart>.
- Kohn, R. (2016). "Elder Invites All Australians to Embrace Tradition of Deep Listening." *The Spirit of Things*, Australian Broadcasting Commission.
- LaDuke, W. (2014). "Winona LaDuke on Redemption." Sacred Land Film Project, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfD5WaHM04E>.
- Lyons, K., Brigg, M., and Quiggin, J. (2017). *Unfinished Business: Adani, the State, and the Indigenous Rights Struggle of the Wangan and Jangalingou Traditional Owners Council*. Brisbane: University of Queensland.
- Malm, A. (2016). *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. London: Verso.
- Mundine, W. (2017). "Activists are Like Colonial Oppressors in Opposing Native Rights." *The Australian*, 17 April.
- Murphy, K. (2017). "Indigenous People Victims of 'Green' Fight Against Adani Mine, says Marcia Langton." *The Guardian*, 7 June.
- Pearson, N. (2017a). "Betrayal: The Turnbull Government has Burned the Bridge of Bipartisanship." *The Monthly*, December 2017–January 2018, pp. 24-34.
- . (2017b). "Prime Minister's Rejection is a Kick in the Guts for Aboriginal Australian."

- The Australian*, 28-29 October.
- Robertson, J. (2017). "Leading Indigenous lawyer hits back at Marcia Langton over Adani." *The Guardian*, 9 June.
- Rose, D.B. (2015) "Dialogue." In: Gibson, K., Rose, D.B., and Fincher, R. (Eds). *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*. Brooklyn, New York: Punctum Books, 2015, pp. 127-131.
- Salick, J., and Byg, A. (2007). *Indigenous People and Climate Change*. Oxford: Tyndall Centre.
- Simpson, A. (2017). "The Ruse of Consent and the Autonomy of 'Refusal:' Cases from Indigenous North America and Australia." Balaton-Chrimes, S., and Stead, V. (Eds.). *Postcolonial Studies, Special Issue: Beyond Recognition*, vol. 20. (1), pp. 18-33. Doi: 10.1080/13688790.2017.1334283.
- Simpson, L.B. (2014). "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 3, (3.), pp. 1-25.
- Todd, Z. (2015). "Indigenizing the Anthropocene." In: Davis, H., and Turpin, E. (Eds.). *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment and Epistemology*. Open Humanities Press, pp. 241-254.
- . (2017). "Relationships." *Cultural Anthropology*. Retrieved from <https://culanth.org/pages/contributing-editors>.
- Velednitsky, S. (2017). "The Case for Ecological Reparations: a Conversation with Jason W. Moore." *Edge Effects*, 31 October. Retrieved from <http://edgeeffects.net/jason-w-moore/>.
- Victorian State Government. (2017). *Aboriginal Community Consultations on the Design of a Representative Body: Aboriginal Treaty Interim Working Group*. Melbourne: Aboriginal Affairs Victoria.
- Victorian Traditional Owner Land Justice Group. (2016). *Sovereign First Nations Treaty Commission: The Treaty Negotiator and Representative Body*.
- Viellaris, R. (2017). "Malcolm Turnbull Risks War with Labor and Indigenous Groups after Rejecting Referendum Council's 'Radical' Blueprint." *The Courier-Mail*, 26 October.
- Vincent, E., and Neale, T. (2016). *Unstable Relations: Indigenous People and Environmentalism in Contemporary Australia*. Crawley: UWAP Scholarly.
- Wahlquist, C. "'Go Light a Fire in the Nation:' Uluru Gathering Aims to Map Path to Recognition", *The Guardian*, 24 May.
- Wangan and Jagalingou Family Council. (2017). "Adani 'Investment' Decision Meaningless Without Indigenous Consent." Retrieved from <http://wanganjalingou.com.au/adani-investment-decision-meaningless-without-indigenous-consent/>.
- Watson, T. (2017). "Indigenous Knowledge Systems can Help Solve the Problems of Climate Change". *The Guardian*, 2 June.
- Wildcat, M., McDonald, M., Irlbacher-Fox, S., and Coulthard, G. (2014). "Learning from the Land: Indigenous Land Based Pedagogy and Decolonization". *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 3, (3), pp. i-xv.
- Winter, C. (2015). "Indigenous Groups Call for a New Water Partnership with Government on the Murray-Darling Basin System." *SA Country Hour*. Australian Broadcasting Commission.

Wright, A. (2016). "What Happens When You Tell Someone Else's Story?" *Meanjin*, Summer, retrieved from <https://meanjin.com.au/essays/what-happens-when-you-tell-somebody-elses-story/>.

Tony Birch is a professorial research fellow in the Moondani Balluk Academic Centre at Victoria University in Melbourne. His research is centrally concerned with climate justice, protection of country and Indigenous ecological knowledge. Birch publishes academic research in the areas of Indigenous history, current debates on climate change and environmental activism. He is also a widely published fiction writer. His short story collections and novels have won numerous awards, including the Victorian Premier's Literary Award in 2017, and the Patrick White Literary Prize in the same year.